

Procreation, Power, and Personal Autonomy: Feminist Reflections

Introduction

Coming to Terms with My Mother

“All women writing look back through their mothers.”
Virginia Woolf

The title of this essay emerged from the depths of my psyche only after considerable struggle. As I was reflecting on connections between my philosophical writing and mothering experience, a dimension surfaced that had long eluded consciousness. So an essay initially intended to reflect my own mothering experience was transformed into an inquiry into the limitations that the institution of motherhood imposes on all mothers, my own included.

I initially feared that this path would lead me away from my original aim. I discovered to my surprise that reflection on our mothers' limitations takes to another level examination of how our own conception of our mothers was influenced by social institutions. So this article is about, first, reflections on my own education and career as a woman and a mother—who cannot unlearn the practice of giving priority to others' needs over her own. My own experience of mothering was largely affirmative. It opened to me a wholly new dimension of interpersonal relationships. Many years passed—and my mother, too—before I could bring into focus a view of my mother not just from a daughter's perspective, but as she might have seen herself.

Second, reflecting on my own mother's limitations led me to see the extent to which she was constrained by cultural norms that were invisible to her. Much as caged creatures who are unable to see the bars blocking escape, I discovered that restraints are rarely likely to come into view until the captive presses out and confronts resistance. Of course, this metaphor privileges the observer's position implying that their point of view is capable of revealing the whole truth about another's situation. In truth, we need both perspectives to understand both our own personal situation and material practice more generally.¹

Last, I have been led to consider the problem of over-generalizing the contrast between experience and institutions, taking a closer look at controversies about the meanings of motherhood, the significance of pregnancy and birth in many women's experience, and how the new reproductive technologies affect women's perspectives on mothering. In particular, I look at how the shift from the ways reproductive experiences shape conceptions of women's identity to the ways beliefs about these experiences are shaped through dominant structures. I seek to explain why these institutionalized social constructions raise issues for all women living within them regardless of whether they seek children or not, and whether their primary activities fall within or outside these boundaries. My exploration of these issues has led me to argue that we need to move beyond framing reproductive issues from the perspective of the industrialized West to encompass developing regions of the world. This points to new directions for

¹ LP: AD's notes to self at this point: “Take into account the manifold ways practice informs theory (cite Virginia Held in Alcoff, ed. 2003, 53). A bit later she adds: “Acknowledge debt to Virginia Held and Sara Ruddick. To Sally I owe a huge debt of gratitude for her courageous efforts to extol maternal joys and to uncover within the philosophical tradition a method to ground mothering practice. To Virginia I owe the valiant example of one, who by voicing her own discomfort with the dual identity of mother and philosopher gave us the courage to acknowledge our own uneasiness and recognize the ‘internalized distortion’ of values we acquired in that prefeminist age.”

feminist theory, for unified concrete action among feminists, and the need for public policy regulating reproductive rights to integrate “alternative” experiences.

My thinking has been hugely influenced by my own experiences of career and motherhood. I use the term “career” guardedly, since it was not until all my children had flown the coop and I was enjoying my first child-free year that I turned seriously to my career path. Until then I’d just muddled through from crisis to crisis—rushing to finish my dissertation under threat of having to repeat the comprehensive exams, searching for a teaching job in close proximity to my husband and children, divorcing an alcoholic husband and transplanting my four children to a better paying job, enduring tenure rejection, waiting a year in unemployment insurance lines rethinking my job prospects, and skipping for several more years from one temporary replacement job to another before grabbing a one-year fellowship at a distant university. It was there that I met a highly successful woman academic who sat me down over a bottle of wine, told me how she had plotted her own career path, and advised me on mine. Until then I hadn’t fully realized that women planned their careers. I’d presumed that only overly controlled men did that!

Much as I might prefer to analyze the impact of innovative birth technologies from a “neutral” standpoint, I have realized that inevitably one’s own experience filters the choice of topics and one’s approach to them. Shortly after finally admitting to myself that I needed to plot a career path, too, I joined a Philosophy Department in a city that I’d not have chosen otherwise. I reconnected with SWIP and was surprised to discover a less congenial group than the regional SWIP crowd I had known before. Several lesbian philosophers were particularly vocal in a way that made me feel uncomfortable as a “straight” woman. Rather than withdraw from the group, I confided in another member who confessed her own initial discomfort and urged me to stick it out and learn from my uneasiness. Good advice, I soon discovered as I began to uncover layers of acculturation into heterosexuality and puzzled over the hostility some lesbian women felt toward their own mothers. My initial surprise was intensified by the gulf between their negativity toward their mothers and my own largely affirmative experience of mothering. Eventually I learned that this was not an apt comparison.

I began to pore over such pieces as Jeffner Allen’s “Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women,” and Shulamith Firestone’s 1970 provocative *The Dialectic of Sex*, writers who were the principle spokespersons for the view that mothering is more a barrier to women’s self-fulfillment than a vehicle for it. Adopting a third-person route around my perception of my own mother, I moved on to Simone De Beauvoir in search of insight into connections between their perception of mothering and their own identity. Nonetheless, it was a long time before a sustained first-person perspective began to emerge in me, and I could admit to my own negativities. This essay represents a further stage in this quest to bring together my own positive mothering experience with my sense of being mothered.

About four months into the life of my fourth (and final) child, I confided to a close friend (with whom I had initially shared reflections on the newly released book *The Feminine Mystique*) my obstetrician’s insistence that my persistent nausea was due to hormones associated with breast feeding. He had given me medication to dry up my milk but I couldn’t bring myself to take it. In response to my expression of reluctance to discontinue breast feeding, he told me authoritatively that, like *all* women, I really felt ambivalent about breast feeding! Relating this to my friend, she remarked, “That’s nonsense. Breast feeding is among the most mutually satisfying of human relationships.” With these words she restored my trust in my own feelings and demolished my deference to physician opinion. But in those times when few women distrusted physician authority, I still couldn’t bring myself to fully appreciate the insight that experience had given me. When I connected this experience with my prior quest for a physician who would allow me to give birth without anesthetic, I began to get a fuller picture of the culture I was unwittingly transgressing. But not until I had read Carolyn McLeod’s “*Self-Trust and Reproductive Autonomy*” (2002) was I able to fully conceptualize these experiences.

I have just alluded to my pursuit of a compatible obstetrician. The first time I was pregnant my internist sent me to “the dean of Houston obstetricians.” His reply when I told him that I was interested in “natural” childbirth was: “when I had lunch with Grantly Dick-Read he told me that sometimes it work and sometimes it doesn’t.” With this display of physician authority he closed the subject, never allowing it to surface again. I gave birth to my first born under the influence of a general anesthetic called

“cyclopropane,” which Dick-Read had characterized as . . . ² Despite my disappointment with this non-event transformed my consciousness so fully that I fired my obstetrician. With my next pregnancy, I shopped around until I located one who would allow me to experience my own childbirth.

Borrowing Marilyn Frye’s metaphor (1983), from the vantage point of caged creatures, the bars blocking escape may not be visible. Yet it is important to recognize the metaphor’s seductive appeal, the way it privileges the observer’s position as though that point of view can reveal the whole truth about the other’s situation. Of course, an observer may sometimes notice features of a person’s situation that are not apparent to the subject herself. Patricia Hill Collins (1991) reminds us that the marginalized Black maid working for a privileged middle class white woman is in a position to see the configuration of power that binds wife to husband far more clearly than her employer. But the maid’s insight is born of an awareness that comes only to those who have experienced similar constraints. Other women’s circumstances may block such empathetic identification altogether or open them to wholly different insights. Lesbian women are likely to recognize constraints on heterosexual women’s freedoms that are so disguised by the appearance of normalcy that they are invisible to straight women.³ Reflection on our mothers’ limitations takes to another level of examination how our own conception of our mothers was influenced by social institutions.

I have been working on this book intermittently since 1984, the year George Orwell set his dystopian novel. My initial impetus sprang from apprehension about the fragmentation of feminist responses to rapidly developing reproductive innovations. But this concern soon led me beyond the boundaries of feminist criticism to global concerns and feminist responses to them. So what was initially to be a book centering around the proliferation of new scientific “miracles” overcoming the barriers of infertility turned into a project with a far more extensive focus. Over the years I have been writing this book and thinking deeply about the themes included here, debate about assisted reproduction has shifted ground as both the technologies and the marketing strategies that sell them have grown increasingly sophisticated. Now part of the common coin of contemporary culture, even novels and films are presuming a general familiarity with new reproductive techniques.⁴

Recent genetic breakthroughs have also contributed to the transformation of reproductive experiences. And the prospect of reproductive cloning has prompted rethinking of reproduction in light of what’s coming to be known as “replication.” Accordingly, my own thinking has shifted ground as well. As I have come to rethink my own earlier views and taken a backward look at authors I formerly cast aside, I have reframed some issues and extended my concern well beyond the established structures of North American bioethics. So my intent is to probe the means of these innovations for those affected by them, both in the Western post-industrial countries and in developing countries.

Unlike bioethicists who approach reproductive innovations predominantly from the perspectives of the reigning moral theories (utilitarianism, deontology, or contractarianism), I am concerned with problems arising out of practices that cannot be readily assimilated to these theories, such as issues about the boundaries of moral community, future people likely to be affected by our genetic interventions, and the ways technologies and the meanings clustering around them affect social perceptions of women in

² LP: AD doesn’t fill this in. I did some searching, and failed to come up with a plausible candidate. For the curious, it would be worth taking a look at Dick-Read’s 1933 book, *Childbirth without Fear: The Principles and Practice of Natural Childbirth*, Printer & Martin, 2013.

³ LP: Of course, feminists (of all stripes) may recognize the sexist constraints upon them but still be unable to change the situation radically. AD comments at the end of this paragraph: “Include Adrienne Rich on her hostility to her own mother and how the institution of mothering framed her own experience of mothering.” And, “Speak of women’s aptitude for baby-making rather than reproductive capacities. See reference to Jaggar’s definition of feminism in Callahan anthology, p. 13, and note on p. 5. See also Sherwin’s definition of feminism in Holmes and Purdy, p. 29, note 6. Emphasize dialectical link between theory and practice, and how they are continuously refined through interaction.”

⁴ I have in mind novels such as Mary Higgins Clark’s 1993 whodunit, *I’ll Be Seeing You* (NY, Simon and Schuster) that revolves around the mismanagement of a frozen embryo facility and televised film dramas, such as “Immediate Family,” which focus on a couple’s ten year quest to achieve pregnancy by whatever means possible.

both industrialized and developing countries. Also I take into account the significance of changing conceptive practices in relation to other points in the reproductive process that have been affected by technological innovations, such as fertility control, obstetrical interventions during pregnancy, labor, and childbirth. Moreover, I include perspectives of women whose lives are child-free.

My strategy in this book—to look directly at tensions dividing and uniting women, both individually and collectively—differs notably from thinkers who emphasize commonalities or differences among women. During the early years of the development of reproductive innovations, feminists tended to waver between two poles, whether to stress differences among women or to suppress them. I confess to some vacillation between these poles as well. I have occasionally caught myself objectifying women with whom I disagree and have tried to reconstruct their world as they see it. This journey has led me across a new terrain, as I have sought to incorporate their vision into my own perspective. Coming to rest anywhere is precarious. For false universalizations come in many guises, harmless and easily correctible or malignant if viewed by the “arrogant eye” which constructs everyone else into a category around herself (Frye 1983), both a common personal failing and often a politically-inspired maneuver. If we are to take our own historicity seriously, then we have no alternative but to acknowledge the partiality of all our perspectives and position our inquiries accordingly. I am dogged by the fear that I might have misunderstood and/or misconstrued. Nor can conflict be confined wholly to social relations—it is embedded within each of our psyches, too. Struggle against impulses to exaggerate difference and underplay resemblance has persuaded me that our differences need not be viewed as extraneous to a common feminist mission.

My own writing has also been interrupted by the usual demands imposed on academics in struggling institutions, and by my own “education” as a woman and a mother. Even the theme of this book evokes conflict within me. I confess to a modicum of envy for people who write without the appearance of conflict, who have discovered safe places within themselves out of which their creative juices flow freely. Perhaps this is mere illusion, though. Virginia Woolf may be right that all women writing look back through their mothers. But the writing of this book has compelled me to look back in a very literal way, to reopen cleavages that had healed over, to reconfigure them, and to seek new resolutions. Through this struggle I have come to experience tension as a positive force that ought to be reaffirmed as the route to greater clarity.

This volume exposes several different levels of tension about the significance of new modes of reproduction. At one, it seeks to explain why the expansion of new reproductive techniques is so widely perceived as a threat to the basic interests of social groups as radically divergent as traditional conservatives and radical feminists. At another, it attempts to create a context for thinking further about the social tensions pervading discussion of these innovations. Such tensions surface on several different planes and are complexly intertwined with gender relations embedded in social institutions and practices, particularly as they relate to sexual identities and social relations bound up with childbearing, rearing, and family connection. So this is also a book about gender politics.

At another level, it is about connections between contemporary social institutions and the conceptual frameworks feminists utilize to analyze gender politics. So it is also about tensions among feminists, both those who share a common commitment to a feminist future, but frequently disagree about how to bring it about, and those who call into question the central categories guiding feminist thought. It is also about tensions experienced by women who do not perceive themselves as feminist but whose interests and concerns feminism seeks to address.

Within the following pages, I have deliberately shuttled between discussions of public policy debate and discourse within feminist literature in order to refocus attention around their interface. Feminist discussion has brought much needed attention to background issues that make the new technologies so controversial, but sometimes bypass the sources of its own discourse in major political and philosophical traditions. By making these interconnections more explicit, I hope to facilitate dialogue among feminists and between them and other participants in the public debate. My hope is that juxtaposing concerns about reproduction and related genetic innovations among groups as disparate as traditional conservatives and radical feminists, and tying these issues to feminist discourses, I can

accomplish two purposes, one theoretical and the other practical. First, I hope to tie feminist theory to a range of concerns central to feminist theory, concerns about biological differences between men and women, the limits these differences place on social constructions of gender, and the ways women's reproductive processes affect people's thinking about gender across linguistic and cultural differences. Second, I aim to draw feminist theory and practice closer together by grounding theory in practice. Though theoretical disputes among feminist scholars have illumined issues central to women's concerns about reproductive innovations (which I intend to discuss) some tendencies within feminist theory have threatened to undermine the fragile coalition so laborious constructed, both among academic feminists and between them and feminist activists. Charges of ethnocentrism, totalizing constructions and false universalizations has called into question the possibility of sustaining any subject-centered inquiry at all. "Woman" in feminist theory has been in danger of dissolving into a plurality of difference. Yet I am optimistic about reconstructing a feminist critique of reproductive innovations in both post-industrial and developing cultures. Considering the partiality of our locations, however, this task can only be accomplished by returning again to serious discussion of the ways women's reproductive capacities inevitably infect all cultural constructions.

So I will look at rival accounts of the meanings of birth, mothering, and family, and their connections to more inclusive theories which replicate these conflicts at a more general level, such as voluntarist theories that assuming individuals are masters of their own will vs. deterministic theories that take humans to be bound by structures wholly transcending individual control and desire. I will draw on feminist theory to interpret these tensions and seek strategies to move beyond them. So at still another level, the subject of this book is feminist dialogue about the meaning of these tensions. My aim here is twofold. First, to bring their work into more direct interconnection with social anxieties about reproductive innovations and second, to advance feminist theory by recentering unresolved issues relating to the possibility of meaningful choice about the conduct of one's own reproductive life and the influence of cultural experiences on it.

At still a different level, my theme can be read as a struggle for control of the future of reproduction. For I look at reproductive innovations from several perspectives corresponding to several chapters of the book. Each perspective incorporates a different balance between theoretical discussion and description. In the initial chapters, I treat the immediate agenda dominating the general public debate about the significance of new modes of reproduction, such as intensified concerns about fertility, emphasis on reproductive freedom, and apparent conflicts between natural and technological methods of reproduction.⁵ Then I turn to agenda underlying public debates focusing on feminist controversies about the centrality of mothering for women's identity. Here I take a closer look at controversies about the meanings of motherhood, the significance of pregnancy and birth in different women's experience, and how the new reproductive technologies affect perspectives toward mothering. The final chapters shift the dominant perspective from the ways reproductive experiences shape conceptions of personal identity to the ways beliefs about these experiences are shaped through dominant social structures. I view these structures from several perspectives stressing the purported desire to mother and family norms. I seek to explain why these institutionalized social constructions raise issues for all women living within them, regardless of whether they seek children or not, and whether their primary activities fall within or outside these boundaries. In the concluding chapter, I argue that we need to move beyond framing reproductive issues from the perspective of the industrialized West to encompass developing regions of the world, and seeks out new directions for feminist theory, for unified concrete action among feminists, and for public policy regulating reproductive rights.

Finally, a brief word about key terms likely to arouse controversy, particularly my uses of the terms "feminist" and "reproduction." The perspective of this book is feminist in a very broad and inclusive sense. As a philosopher, I am more ambivalent about recent feminist forays into postmodernism. I take seriously current concerns about the dissolution of subject-centered feminist inquiry.

⁵ LP: AD comments here: "Add to this." Also, her most recent version of this introduction contains a good deal of material in chapter 10. It seemed best to me to delete it here, and leave it there.

Acknowledgement of our ethnocentrism already takes us beyond it, where if we search diligently enough, we are likely to discover new connections between our own ethnic experiences and those of differently situated women. Though we can never wholly transcend our own immersion in time and place, this awareness can itself be liberatory, freeing us of the illusion that such transcendence is possible for anyone. I suspect that fear of being taken as “essentialist” has led many feminists to deny that biological similarities among women do matter, and that difference “shows” through conceptual and institutional constructions.